



Farmer Time – Atkins Farms

Rob Atkin is a partner of Atkin Farms based just outside Uttoxeter in Staffordshire. The farm is mainly arable growing 1000 acres of combinable crops, including oil seed rape, wheat, barley, oats, pulses and beans.

They also have a beef cattle enterprise of which they buy in Belgium Blues as calves and rearing them to finish or sell as stores at 18 months old.

Atkin Farms also runs two diversification businesses – A secure dog paddock and an indoor and outdoor caravan storage site.

The farm is involved in schemes such as being a trial farm for a local water company. This trial looks at different methods to reduce pesticides in water, nitrogen leaching as well as different ways to reduce soil erosion and sediment loss across the farm.

They are also an Agrii digital technology farm, which looks at ways digital technology can help crop production. The main focus of this at the moment is applying variable seed rates for drilling and fertiliser applications, using satellite imagery to base fertiliser plans for the future and to ensure maximum productivity is reached on farm.

Rob is paired with a year 3 class (ages 7-8) at Kings Hawford school in Coventry. Miss Owens, their teacher is enthused about the reaction the children have had to their Farmer Time sessions. Their first Farmer Time call was in September 2020, and they haven't looked back!

We asked Rob a few questions about his experience, here's what he had to say:

'How often do your calls take place?'

Initially it was once a month, however it soon became fortnightly due to children being home schooled as a result of the pandemic. It's something to look forward to for both the children and I, it's certainly something a little different for the kids and the focus is great!

'What would your normal working day be, Rob?'

I farm with my parents, and we have two members of staff. I make the day to day decisions of running the farm. My normal day begins at half 6, and finishes when it finishes! At the moment it's winter, so there's a number of things that need doing, which include lots of time in the office doing paperwork, cattle passports and general admin.

We feed and bed the cattle first thing, then go on to loading grain, before finding ourselves doing anything routine with the cattle, followed by a few hours in the office and walking the crops once a week throughout the winter.

As the months change, as do our priorities, we spend more time on the land in the spring, drilling and more field walking. The summer finds us busy silaging, and of course harvest, and then back to drilling and land prep in the Autumn before the cows come in to be housed over winter.

For further information about this initiative, and how your school or farm can get involved visit:

www.farmertime.org

Contact: Tabitha.Salisbury@leafuk.org

‘Why did you sign up to Farmer Time?’

I feel it’s important to educate the general public and the next generation about where their food comes from, helping to beat some of the myths of farming. As farmers we need to try and help promote British agriculture and spread the message that British farming has some of the highest Health and Welfare standards in the world. As farmers we are all doing what we can for the environment. I am a strong believer that we need to pedal our own boat and we can’t expect people to buy British produce from farmers if we don’t get out there and tell the consumer about the product and try to help them understand the work that goes into it and why it is worth the price that it is.

I also think it’s important that the children know where the food originates from, it doesn’t just come from a shop, or a carton, it comes from a farm and a lot of time and effort goes into that. Grass roots is essential for them to learn that their bread, Weetabix and flour come from wheat grown in fields, and that the calves we rear might end up on their plate one day.

‘What topics have you covered in your calls?’

We were drilling wheat for our first session, we showed them the field, how we drilled the wheat, the seed and the machinery. We have sheep grazing cover crops such as stubble turnips over winter, so we focussed on sheep for one session. We talked in detail about how they help with the soil’s fertility for the next crop that will be planted. We’ve also covered calf rearing, which raised lots of questions such as ‘how many burgers can you make from one animal?’, ‘what’s the best way to feed an animal?’ and ‘why do you keep them indoors in the winter?’. We covered the life cycle of the calf, where they come from, how their life develops, and the honest conversation of where they then end up. We even pointed out where some of their key joints of meat would come from on the carcass.

We’ve have also interacted – I challenged them to find an everyday cooking item that might contain some of the ingredients we produce on farm. I showed them pictures of the product and we ticked off the ingredients. They really started to think outside the box with some interesting and accurate answers!

We also came up with a challenge for the children on PowerPoint, they had to design an ideal shed for my cattle, I gave an outline of what was needed and they got creating! Some of the creations were brilliant! I chose an overall winner and the class were so invested in how they could make it the best they could which was lovely to see.

Farmer Rob's Challenge

Can you design a cattle shed for our farm?

What might you need to include in your cattle shed design? What will cows need?

Use this video for inspiration.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ooy_DmORP7w

You need to include the following in your design...

- Enough space for 30 animals
- A sleeping area
- A feeding area
- Two doorways for access
- A feed trough
- A water trough
- 3 sides must be fully closed, 1 side open
- A light
- Any shape
- Needs to have a 2m solid wall around 3 sides of the shed
- Can be made out of metal, wood, concrete, either new or recycled materials

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‘What’s the most rewarding thing about being involved?’

The feedback is great to hear, saying how much they’re enjoying it and looking forwards to the next call. The questions are great too – they’re engaging with me, and some of them are quite challenging! On occasion I’ve had to do some research and get back to them!

It’s nice hearing that the teachers want to do more because the interaction is so good. I look forward to the phone calls and it really does give you a buzz afterwards. The parents have started saying how much the kids look forward to the sessions too which is nice to see.



‘What impact do you feel you’ve had on the class?’

They’ve certainly started to understand a little more about farming, They are remembering what I have spoken about in previous calls and researching things, along side really thinking about their food. I think they are also beginning to understand that their food doesn’t come from a supermarket, but that it does come from a field or an animal. Some of them can even tell me which crop is in their food which is really rewarding!

‘What surprised you most about Farmer Time?’

The diversity of the children has been a real eye opener for me, they come from all different backgrounds which is a good opportunity as a farmer. I’d talked about doing veg boxes for all the class, and one child mentioned he was unable to do this because he didn’t have a garden, living in a high rise flat. This was a shock to me, and a reminder that it’s easy to forget the different lives lived throughout the UK, when I’ve been privileged enough to have acres of free playground throughout my life.

I was also surprised at how much the children want to interact. I’m beginning to establish a relationship with them as a class, we all look forward to the calls and they’re beginning to ask more in depth questions. I’m also gaining in confidence and happier to give more in-depth answers suitable for their age group as time goes on.

The excitement on their faces at some of my day-to-day activities, and how much they want to see is hugely rewarding, but also a surprise as I never realised how some of my mundane jobs are the highlight of their day!

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‘What would you say to others thinking about signing up to Farmer Time?’

I would definitely encourage anyone to sign up today! It’s not a lot of time out of your workload, 15-30 mins each session, and it’s so easy to just generally talk to them about what you’re doing or ask and answer questions. We can’t expect people to support our industry if we’re not prepared to actively promote what we do.

It truly is an opportunity to promote why we have high standards, why we have subsidies, what we’re doing to help enhance the environment, why we work early til’ late, day in, day out. We can’t force people to support our industry, but we can supply them with information and the tools to make informed decisions by themselves, and raise awareness of why healthy food choices are so important!

The logo for King's Hawford features a stylized white shield with a crown on top and a cluster of grapes below. To the right of the shield, the text 'King's Hawford' is written in white, with '#MeetKings' in red below it. A red tractor icon is positioned to the right of the logo.
A white tablet is shown, displaying a Zoom meeting grid. The grid consists of 20 small video windows arranged in a 4x5 grid. Each window shows a different participant, mostly children, engaged in the meeting. Some are holding up cards or papers. The Zoom interface is visible at the bottom of the tablet screen.

#FarmerTime

With Many thanks to Rob Atkin, Atkins farms and Kings Hawford school.

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